New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1951

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Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of March 12, 1951

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK POST HOME NEWS
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"The Moon Is Blue"

New York Post
HOME NEWS
March 9, 1951

By Richard Watts Jr.

An Expert New Romantic Comedy

Since this seems to be a season in which theatergoers are chiefly interested in the lighter forms of entertainment, there can be little doubt that immense popular success awaits F. Hugh Herbert's new comedy, "The Moon Is Blue," which had its first performance at the Henry Miller last night. And it will be a popularity that is well deserved. For Mr. Herbert has written a romantic trifle that is both gay and charming. Otto Preminger has staged it deftly, and it is played with something pleasantly close to perfection by Barbara Bel Geddes, Donald Cook and Barry Nelson.

There is very little plot to "The Moon Is Blue," and this, it turns out, is one of its chief virtues. In a fashion that is frankly and proudly inconsequential, the author offers a kind of romantic triangle between a guileless young television actress, a serious young architect, and the debonair father of the girl in whom the architect is supposed to be interested. And, since there is little story to bother about, the play concerns itself almost exclusively with creating an air of blithe good humor that is expertly engaging.

Romantic Charm

Among other things, it can be said that "The Moon Is Blue" succeeds handsomely in the feat of eating its cake and still holding on to it. At least, Mr. Herbert has written a sex comedy that has its atmosphere of modest sophistication toward its subject and yet manages to keep a spirit of attractive innocence. His play is neither smirking nor mawkish. It is, without straining too much, funny, good-natured and likeable; and, thanks in great part to Miss Bel Geddes' enchanting performance, it maintains a genuine quality of romantic charm.

Don't expect anything of importance in the way of high literary wit or satirical brilliance or sharp insight into character in the new comedy. That is not the sort of game it is after. It is, nevertheless, written with grace, humor and considerable understanding. From its first scene atop the Empire State Building, it captures its mood of cheerful romantic humor and, with remarkably few lapses, retains it to the end. It is a comedy of spirit without malice, even when it aims at two such familiar targets as television and the State Department.

Four Characters

There are but four characters, including one actor who has the perhaps pleasant assignment of merely coming on, punching the hero in the eye, and disappearing, and all the performances are a delight. Everyone knows by now that Barbara Bel Geddes is one of the best young actresses on the American stage, but she has never had a chance to be quite as delightful as she is in "The Moon Is Blue." It would be a cruel thing to say of most girls in the theater that they are "wholesome," but Miss Bel Geddes can even make wholesomeness romantic and charming, and she makes the talkative and innocent heroine an authentic joy.

Donald Cook has long been recognized as an actor singularly expert in playing crisp comedy, and he is at his best in the entertaining role of the somewhat unprincipled but engaging father. Barry Nelson, who is one of the ablest of the young leading men, is always both credible and likeable as the architect. As for Mr. Preminger's staging, it is so good as to make me forgive him his recent "Four Twelves Are 48." And there should be a word for Stewart Chaney's two attractive sets. "The Moon Is Blue" is good expert fun.

"THE MOON IS BLUE"

Comedy by F. Hugh Herbert; staged by Otto Preminger; settings by Stewart Chaney; presented by Aldrich and Myers and Mr. Preminger in association with Julius Fleischmann at Henry Miller's Theatre, March 8, 1951. The cast:

Patty O'Neil.....
Barbara Bel Geddes
Donald Gresham..Barry Nelson
David Slater.....Donald Cook
Michael O'Neill....Ralph Dunn

Synopsis: The entire action of the play takes place in New York City within 24 hours in springtime. Act I. Scene 1. The observation tower of the Empire State Bldg. Early evening. Scene 2. An apartment on East 49th Street. An hour later. Act II. The same. 2 hours later. Act III. Scene 1. The same. Several hours later. Scene 2. The observation tower of the Empire State Bldg. Following afternoon.

DAILY NEWS
March 9, 1951

'The Moon Is Blue,' a Spring Frolic With Nothing but Fun on Its Mind

By JOHN CHAPMAN

F. Hugh Herbert's new comedy, "The Moon Is Blue, is a happy sign of Spring, being quite as foolish and jaunty as a fine Easter bonnet. Three people—Barbara Bel Geddes, Barry Nelson and Donald Cook—acted it out last evening at Henry Miller's Theatre to everybody's satisfaction. Well, anyway, I hope everybody was satisfied and I know I was. I came away from the theatre feeling young and gay, without a thing on my mind—and in these days a play that can send you home without a thing on your mind is a solace, a benison and quite a lot of fun besides.

Boy and Girl—That's All.

There is another actor in "The Moon Is Blue," making four in all. He is Ralph Dunn. He may be a very good actor. He may have played the kilts off Macduff once for all I know. But I didn't have much of a chance to study Mr. Dunn's quality and ability last evening, for all he did was to bust into an apartment, bellow a couple of lines, pop Mr. Nelson in the left eye and bust out. Since this performance was so brief we might as well consider Mr. Herbert's opus as a three-character comedy.

It is very difficult to keep three characters talking for three acts. Mr. Herbert, like John van Druten when he wrote "The Voice of the Turtle," knows how to do it. You just make them keep talking about nothing. A little sex, maybe, but nothing really important. When it's a decent time of night to send the audience home, or to somebody else's home, you simply have Boy kiss Girl and tell the stage manager to tell a stage hand to pull down the curtain.

Barbara a Comedienne.

In the case of "The Moon Is Blue," the boy meets the girl on the observation roof of the Empire State Building and asks her to drop down to his apartment for a talk. (She doesn't drink. Very nice girl all around. Wholesome.) So when they get there an elderly nuisance—he is 41—barges in for a talk. That is all there is to it, but somehow it is refreshing and amusing.

The main source of refreshment and amusement is Miss Bel Geddes. The two or three times I've seen this young lady, she has been a very earnest little person in very earnest dramas. All of a sudden, last evening at Henry Miller's, she appears as a captivating comedienne. She is cute as a kitten but as shrewd as a bookmaker when it comes to timing her lines and movement. The title of comedienne should not be carelessly bestowed upon a young actress, and I know what I'm saying when I call Miss Bel Geddes one.

The lass could have no pleasanter companions than Mr. Nelson and Mr. Cook. Mr. Nelson is so much the serious young swain, as innocent of adulterous purpose as Galahad himself. Mr. Cook is the man of the world, who likes to make passes as long as he holds glasses of drinking whiskey.

Otto Preminger has directed the comedy and has succeded in getting the least out of it — which is precisely what he should have done. He knew it was nonsense and he has kept it so. Stewart Chaney has contributed two charming sets. I still don't know what Mr. Herbert, the author, has contributed, aside from some funny lines and an amiable attitude toward young females. I can do at least half as good as that. I have an amiable attitude toward Barbara Bel Geddes.

The New York Times

March 9, 1951

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Out of a hint and a grimace F. Hugh Herbert has spun a droll romantic comedy, "The Moon Is Blue," which opened at the Henry Miller last evening and ought to stay open for quite a long time. It includes four characters, one of whom works for only about three minutes before he is through for the day; and the plot is about as extensive as a brief anecdote.

But Mr. Herbert has a very impromptu attitude toward life. And his cast includes Barbara Bel Geddes. It is difficult on short notice to define the relationship between these two factors. But some definite relationship does exist. For Mr. Herbert's attitude seems wholly plausible and, in fact, desirable when Miss Bel Geddes marches through his play, looking very much as though she believes what she is saying.

* * *

That is manifestly impossible. Mr. Herbert is telling the story of an agreeable young architect (played by Barry Nelson) who picks up a personable young lady (played by Miss Bel Geddes) in the tower of the Empire State Building. In a subsequent scene, set naturally in the architect's apartment, Mr. Herbert introduces a middle-aged libertine (played with an entirely fraudulent Southern accent by Donald Cook).

There is no point in telling you what happens. In the first place, you would not believe it. In the second place, the chronicler of these proceedings does not believe it. It is more than likely that nothing happens after all. For Mr. Herbert does not seem to be extraordinarily inventive; and his dialogue leans toward the mechanical and some of it, especially in the second act, is patently monotonous.

But while the actors are prowling around the stage, there is a definite impression that something delightfully crack-brained is taking place in the most normal circumstances. The architect is trying over the telephone to shake a girl he has been inadvertently engaged to. The libertine, who is her father, is uncertain whether he should horse-whip the architect or marry the Empire State young lady. Being both naive and worldly, and also fantastically communicative, the young lady tries desperately to understand what is going on, complicating everything she puts her little mind to. The whole episode is pleasantly insane.

To say that it would not be funny if it were not acted so expertly is beside the point. For the only fact worth mentioning is that it is acted expertly. Otto Preminger has directed it with relish. Stewart Chaney has given it one of those wildly luxurious settings that fantasticate the performance.

As the amiable young lady, Miss Bel Geddes is radiantly beautiful—a fact that explains quite a lot about everything. But she also manages to act a coherent character, looking gravely puzzled by the behavior of the helpless male, smiling enchantingly at the hopeful interludes in a cock-eyed manuscript and always waiting for the right moment to speak a line. Mr. Herbert ought to regard her as a treasure. Everyone else inevitably does.

* * *

She is ably abetted by Barry Nelson, whose soft speech, creased smile, undulating walk and theatre sense compose the perfect comic counterpoint. And Mr. Cook's dissipated insouciance as the wealthy libertine introduces a contrast of considerable value. All Ralph Dunn has to do in the second act is to burst in belligerently, sock the architect in the eye, deliver a brief moral homily and return to the pinochle game backstage. This is not an extensive assignment, but Mr. Dunn does it satisfactorily with both biceps.

Nothing much happens in "The Moon Is Blue." But some of it is very funny, and most of it is delightful.

New York World-Telegram and The ~~Evening~~ Sun

March 9, 1951

'Moon' Is Brightest Comedy on Horizon

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Type—Comedy.
Topic—Love.
I find it—A joy.

The freshest, gayest little comedy since "Voice of the Turtle" is the way "The Moon Is Blue" will most often be described in the coming months.

F. Hugh Herbert has a wonderful ear and understanding for the terrible irrelevent logic and unshakable persistence of the female in its more youthful stages. Once more he has created a very young woman whose worst characteristics are her most winning ones.

April Face.

Barbara Bel Geddes always reminds me of a song called "April Face. Her blond beauty and trim figure vastly enhance the role of the would-be actress. She has just the right mixture of being irresistible and unattainable.

This is a girl whose convictions are granite and whose curiosity has the delicacy of an electric drill. Employing her streak of Machiavellian blood, she rapidly places a strange young architect in the position of apologizing for picking her up on the Empire State Building's Observation Tower.

With typical teenlike absence of humor about herself, she goes home to dinner with him, innocently lures the father of his ex-fiancee into giving her $600 for nothing, and gets the boy knocked cold by her own father. In so doing she captures this architect's heart for good.

Heavy on Words.

There are only four people in the cast, and one of them, the girl's father, is barely on stage long enough to deliver his punch and retreat with his offspring. Consequently the play is inclined to be mighty conversational. But it is good light talk, and gaily spoken.

If the spate of words seems pushed once in a while, it is no more of a pressure than one hears at any average dinner party.

There is no escaping the fact that Donald Cook must head the list of the several bright talents who have contrived to make the play so completely charming.

He plays the neighboring father, rich, indulgent and amusingly alcoholic in a vaguely Southern accent. Since he has a daughter just the age of the young actress, he cannot quite indulge in his instinctive machinations to lure her away from his young friend.

Cook is as adept at wicked comic timing as anyone in the theater today. This role is magnificently designed for his talents. He spins laughs out of nowhere and makes the most of carefully planned toppers.

It is an exquisitely geared performance. At one point, with a simple and fairly short sentence about swatting his wife with a skillet, he gets half a dozen separate laughs, so loud that he must hold each next word or phrase till the house quiets. A short while later, he has the audience gaffawing just as loud by looking straight at another character and saying nothing.

It is a truly ingenious comic performance.

Unconscious Humor.

Miss Bel Geddes' role is quite different, in that most of her humor must come from the character's maintaining complete ignorance of being amusing. She maintains this bland sage nonsense like a lovely young Gracie Allen, in a beautifully modulated and sustained appearance.

Barry Nelson is the architect and does a very neat and engaging job of it. Since he is playing a normal, humorous fellow, most of the others' laughs bounce off him. But he is warm and charming and exasperated, and a good loser of his affections.

The title? This could only happen once in a blue moon!

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

March 9, 1951

By OTIS L. GUERNSEY Jr.

The Stars Are Shining

F. HUGH HERBERT'S new comedy at Henry Miller's Theater is handfuls of words strewn across the stage like silver-coated confetti. "The Moon Is Blue" makes the point that once in a blue moon two nice young people can meet and fall in love within the short span of a day, and its words are the exchanges between the three corners of a romantic triangle. Barbara Bel Geddes and Barry Nelson are the star-crossed lovers, and Donald Cook keeps them apart for awhile with a dissolute charm which relieves an incipient monotony of fresh, young sex. Under Otto Preminger's direction it is all as frothy and inevitable as the action of a swizzle-stick in a champagne glass, but it is a pleasant, well-executed example of its airy type.

* * *

It might be said that Herbert's comedy presents itself in the opening scene and that subsequent developments are mere widening ripples of conversation around an already established disturbance. This first meeting takes place at the top of the Empire State building; and, by the time the preliminaries are over, she has voiced an interest in him, declared herself a virgin, warned him that she is interested in marrying a middle-aged man and agreed to come up to his apartment for a drink. Nothing changes much from here on except, of course, that Herbert supplies his situation with an elderly rake in person. Building a play out of the parlor wit of these three characters is a daring stunt, a piece of theatrical legerdemain. There are times when the author's ingenuity is taxed, but for the most part his play bubbles along merrily in its shallow and iridescent path.

* * *

Miss Bel Geddes is so believable and likeable as a stage projection of eager, inquisitive youth, that one wishes her part called for a little less speculation on her own state of chastity. The almost stubborn naivete of some of her lines is the play's weakest humor. She is wholly enchanting elsewhere as she keeps the males spinning around her, at an innocent distance. Nelson is also very capable indeed in the still more difficult part of the nice young man, a thankless job in any play. It is to his great credit that he underlines this traditionally colorless symbol with strength and personality. These two are a fine couple, and they leave you with the feeling that they will settle down from all this repartee and make a good marriage of it.

* * *

In the third and most important corner of the triangle Cook, the master farceur, gives the play its contrast and perspective in a truly adroit portrayal of a careless Southerner who, as the author says, likes steaks, liquor and women, in that order. All of Herbert's best witticisms and sarcasms are in Cook's part, with cynicism attacking and being repulsed by love's young dream; and, surely, they could not have been placed in better hands. Besides the Empire State set which frames the show, Stewart Chaney has devised just the sort of uncluttered, clean-lined bachelor's apartment in which one might expect to find a hard-working disciple of Frank Lloyd Wright. Presented by Aldrich and Myers in association with Julius Fleischmann, "The Moon Is Blue" supplies in reasonable quantity the fragile good humor of a bedroom farce which takes place in the living room and is therefore made up mostly of clever innuendo.

Journal American

March 9, 1951

Plenty of Laughs, Looks Like a Hit

By JOHN McCLAIN

Assuming you like to laugh and don't care much what it's about you had better start negotiating for tickets to "The Moon Is Blue," the new F. Hugh Herbert comedy which Aldrich and Myers unveiled at the Henry Miller Theatre last night. I think they have a hit.

But don't expect anything but the most fragile and wispy plot, or a situation that hasn't served manfully many times before. On the other hand, you will witness three superlative performances by Barbara Bel Geddes, Donald Cook and Barry Nelson, all ingeniously directed by Otto Preminger.

And you will hear more funny lines than have been delivered elsewhere this season.

Miss Bel Geddes plays the part of Patty O'Neill, the delightfully unpredictable daughter of a cop. She picks up a young architect, Barry Nelson, on top of the Empire State building and after carefully explaining her maidenly innocence agrees to go home with him for a drink before dinner.

At the apartment she offers to cook dinner and while he is out buying provender Donald Cook, the father of the girl he was to marry, enters the scene.

The rest of the action, if you can call it such, produces a series of minor incidents involving the two men which leads them at various times to have serious doubts about her chastity. There is even a point at which she herself begins to doubt the value of its possession.

The show is over-talky in many spots and weakens perceptibly in the second act when Donald Cook goes on and on about life as regarded by an aging roue. But he does even this with consummate skill and there are enough solid laughs interspersed to save it from bogging down completely.

Miss Bel Geddes has charge of the proceedings at almost all times, bringing credence to this difficult role of a screwball earbender. Barry Nelson performs with the proper mixture of humor and nobility, and there is a beautiful bit by Ralph Dunn, who plays the cop father.

The sets by Stewart Chaney were bright and inventive and a pleasant, nostalgic air was lent to the whole occasion by a back-stage orchestra playing old hits between scenes.

Daily Mirror

March 9, 1951

'Moon Is Blue' a Happy Well-Played Comedy

By ROBERT COLEMAN

"The Moon Is Blue" is just what Broadway needs: a slick, sophisticated and hilarious comedy. F. Hugh Herbert penned the new play at Henry Miller's Theatre. Aldrich and Myers, in association with Julius Fleishmann, produced it. Stewart Chaney has designed settings that are pleasant to look at, and Otto Preminger's direction is first rate.

"The Moon Is Blue" has to do with the pretty young daughter of a hard-boiled cop. Because of her father's strictness where his girl's beaux are concerned, she develops a naive interest in sex. Meeting a successful architect accidentally atop the Empire State Building, she accepts a dinner invitation.

They stop by his apartment. It starts to rain. So she offers to cook a meal for him. While he's purchasing groceries, a cynical Southern papa drops in to find out why the architect has broken off with his daughter—particularly after keeping her out until 10 a. m. But we shan't tell you any more, for we know you will want to see "The Moon Is Blue" and discover what happens subsequently.

Anyway, we can tip you off that there's a happy ending to this happy comedy. It would be a shame to spoil the surprises that Herbert has in store for you, so let's just say that he has developed them with facility, felicity, frankness and warmth.

Donald Cook, hitherto one of our best leading men, makes his bow as a comedian in "The Moon Is Blue." Fine trouper that he is, Cook manages the metamorphosis admirably. There are times when he reminds you just a little of Edward Everett Horton, though he has his own individual style. To his lot fall some of Herbert's most sparkling and human lines, and he capitalizes on them superbly.

Cook is a revelation to us as the worldly, kindly, understanding Southern wolf. He paces the proceedings expertly. He knows when to toss dialogue away casually and when to punch it. We hope he will resist the temptation to be a leading man again for quite a spell.

Barbara Bel Geddes and Barry Nelson are perfect as the romantic youngsters. They are attractive and gifted players. They team beautifully with Cook in making "The Moon Is Blue" the best comedy of its kind since "The Voice of the Turtle." Oh yes, a salute also is due Ralph Dunn as the belligerent Irish cop.

"The Moon Is Blue" is immensely funny. We think you will enjoy it as much as we did. The first-nighters shook the Henry Miller's rafters with their spontaneous laughter and appreciative applause. Gee, it was good to laugh again, especially in these parlous times. Take our advice and buy your tickets immediately, for they're going to be difficult to obtain.

"The Autumn Garden"

Journal American

March 8, 1951

Play at Coronet Beautifully Set

By JOHN McCLAIN

In "The Autumn Garden," which opened at the Coronet Theatre last night, Lillian Hellman has told a story of middle-aged frustration, of the futility of fulfilment in general, the evils of the rich, the hope for the youth of the world, the importance of authority, and about seven other points which I'm sure I missed.

It is a big effort, beautifully set and directed, and performed by a brilliant cast. I liked it — but with reservations.

Whether or not you always agree, the writing is stimulating and assured; people react as they might on the other side of the footlights, and the author may be pardoned if at times she endeavors to say too many things at once or to juggle too many emotional crises.

She gets ten characters assembled in an old Southern mansion, a place where most of them grew up, and one of the things she certainly succeeded in doing was to involve them sufficiently with one another so that I, for one, could not possibly reconstruct the plot within the limits of the space allotted.

• • •

Retired General, Too

There is a philandering artist and his wife; a miserable bachelor; a firm and funny grandmother; a retired general and his perennially childish wife; the landlady and her French niece, and granny's rich daughter and her unfortunate son.

Without going into detail I can tell you that the rich grandson is engaged to the landlady's niece, although it soon becomes apparent that his heart is not in the project. He would rather go to Europe with an off-stage character named Payson, who is described as being entirely unsavory. That's one plot.

While this is going on the general is trying to persuade his wife to divorce him to save him from death by boredom. At the same time the bachelor has shown signs that his life has been demolished because the landlady would not marry him in his youth.

Into this simple setting comes the artist and his wife. In almost no time he has everybody increasingly loused up, capping the climax by creating an incident with the French niece which causes a town scandal. There is, frankly, no room to tell you more.

• • •

A Note of Chekov

I thought there was a distinct note of Chekov sounding through the proceedings. There is the symbolism of the house and the final futility of almost everything everybody does. In fact I would not have been surprised to hear those woodsmen hacking at the cherry trees as the final curtain fell.

Fredric March is excellent as the artist and succeeded in achieving a rare thing: playing a guy who is slightly drunk and gets drunker without ever over-doing.

Florence Eldridge, the almost imbecillic wife of the general, did a masterful job with a part which was at times almost implausible; Ethel Griffies, as the grandmother was, uh—well, she was Miss Griffies, and you can't top that.

I liked Jane Wyatt, as the artist's wife (an unrewarding part) and Kent Smith, as the bachelor, and Colin Keith-Johnston (the general) and Carol Goodner, the landlady. And I thought Joan Lorring was particularly promising as the French niece.

"THE AUTUMN GARDEN"

Play by Lillian Hellman; staged by Harold Clurman; settings by Howard Bay; costumes by Anna Hill Johnstone; presented by Kermit Bloomgarden at the Coronet Theatre, March 7, 1951. The cast:

Rose Griggs..Florence Eldridge
Mrs. Mary Ellis..Ethel Griffies
Gen. Benjamin Griggs....
Colin Keith-Johnston
Edward Crossman...Kent Smith
Frederick Ellis...James Lipton
Carrie Ellis..Margaret Barker
Sophie Tuckerman.....
Joan Lorring
Leon.....Maxwell Glanville
Constance Tuckerman...
Carol Goodner
Nicholas Denery.....
Fredric March
Nina Denery.....Jane Wyatt
Hilda.....Lois Holmes

Synopsis: The time is September, 1949. The place is the Tuckerman house in a summer resort on the Gulf of Mexico, about 100 miles from New Orleans. Act I. Monday night after dinner. Act II. Scene 1. The following Sunday morning. Scene 2. That night. Act III. Early the next morning.

I would guess that this will be a highly controversial offering, but I will cast my lot with those who believe it will succeed.

New York World-Telegram
and
The Sun

March 8, 1951

'Autumn Garden' Is Rich and Mellow

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Type—Drama.
Subject—Accomplishment.
I find it—Engrossing.

"The Autumn Garden" is a play of unusually rich texture. It picks up threads of half a dozen complex personal narratives, and weaves them into a big tapestry.

There is an over-all purpose, to show that whether or not one comes to terms with life, the big result depends on the investment of character, judgment and effort.

None of the people Lillian Hellman writes about is admirable or particularly contented. Yet she gradually reveals them in a manner which is utterly absorbing.

A Comforting Emotion.

The play's advice is most useful to beginners, but it pays an onlooker the compliment of assuming he is still youthful enough to benefit by it.

A play about failures should not ordinarily be exhilarating. I found it so, and think most people will, for the feeling it gives you of being distinctly superior to the people on the stage. That is a remarkably comforting emotion.

The characters are gathered at a Gulf Coast guest house, some of them meeting again after more than 20 years. The most colorful figure is an artist, a sort of F. Scott Fitzgerald without talent, but a lush and a faker, whose good looks and clumsy charm hold a lovely rich wife through endless quarrels.

Compromises With Fate.

The spinster who owns the beautiful house has always loved the artist's memory, and spurned an old beau, until it is too late.

There is a General with grown sons, who at last hopes to divorce a boringly childish woman.

A rich and realistic old grandmother brings fact if not gaiety into the lives of her selfish daughter-in-law and weak grandson. The boy almost effects a mutually expedient marriage with the hostess' refugee niece.

All the older characters have arrived at a point of payoff. There is not much choice left them, beyond making the best bargain. This does not sound cheery, but Miss Hellman has related most of her story with a great amount of wily humor.

I cannot recall Fredric March, Florence Eldridge or Kent Smith in better form. March is the painter, vain and petty, nosy and shallow. It is a magnificent job of an actor exposing a character.

Miss Eldridge plays the silly wife of the General. With her inevitable taste, she acts this ridiculous woman, with no thought of being comical or piteous. The result is an uncannily real person.

A Grand Grandmother.

Mr. Smith plays the one man in the group who consciously wastes himself, and no longer cares to quit it. It is a characterization which suggests a live presence beyond the stage setting, in both past and future.

Ethel Griffies has a royal time as the grandmother. She socks home her cutting truths with fabulous aim.

In a sense it may be clever playwrighting that makes me feel Jane Wyatt's role as the painter's wife is exasperatingly neglected. I want to know much more about her.

Invites a Second Visit.

I could do without the windup of the European niece's story. Writing, direction or acting make about-face in character, when she goes after money.

Carol Goodner is touching and correctly futile as the hostess, and Colin Keith-Johnston makes a dryly unemotional General. Margaret Barker is very effective as the play's most unsympathetic character, a possessive and somewhat stupid mother.

Not in some time have I seen a play like this, where the falling curtain was a signal for the decision to come see it again.

The New York Times

March 8, 1951

Lillian Hellman Dramatizes Middle-Aged People in 'The Autumn Garden'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Wait long enough and Lillian Hellman has something conclusive to say in "The Autumn Garden," which opened at the Coronet last evening. She says that middle-aged people cannot escape from their past, and that they are personally responsible for the sort of people they have become.

Although this is true, it is not very profound nor original; and it is seized upon here because the play is so diffuse and intangible. Usually Miss Hellman controls her plays absolutely. This time she has let the characters take charge of their own affairs. She never pushes her people around.

* * *

In terms of sympathy and understanding, they are the most truthful characters she has brought into existence. The materials of "The Autumn Garden" are pure metal. This is a scrupulous play. In a summer resort on the Gulf of Mexico, Miss Hellman has assembled a group of idle people of middle years, bored with themselves and bored with each other. The languors of their vacation are momentarily upset by the arrival of a bustling, egotistical artist who likes to meddle in other people's affairs.

By being drunken and disorderly, he manages to make life so painful for himself and the others that everyone feels a little ashamed and disgruntled. In the last act there is a flicker of scandal and people start to draw lazy conclusions about themselves.

* * *

But "The Autumn Garden" is perhaps unintentionally in the Chekhov tradition of character description, aimlessness and mood. The characters are not only brilliantly drawn, but they are notably actable. Florence Eldridge's whirling, fluttery portrait of an aging nitwit; Fredric March's exuberant meddler and egotist; Kent Smith's lazy cynic; Ethel Griffies' tart matriarch; Colin Keith-Johnston's restless general with dreams of a peaceful loneliness; Carol Goodner's troubled spinster; Jane Wyatt's contemptuous but weak wife to a drifter—all those parts are vivid and fascinating, not only because they are admirably played, but because Miss Hellman has written them out of knowledge and integrity.

By way of contrast, Miss Hellman has drawn the character of a European refugee whose attitudes bring out the shiftlessness of the spirit of the Americans. This has been a more difficult part to write; and despite the pleasant acting of Joan Lorring it lacks the frankness of the rest of the writing.

"The Autumn Garden" has been wonderfully produced. Harold Clurman's direction is fluent and sensitive. Howard Bay's setting of a colorless but comfortable interior is a first-rate piece of work; and Anna Hill Johnstone's costumes are effortlessly rich and attractive.

In most respects this is Miss Hellman at the peak of her talents—observant, sympathetic, honest and alert. Nothing is forced. Everything is lucid. In the circumstances, it seems ungrateful to add that "The Autumn Garden" is a little platitudinous. Like the characters whom it admirably describes, it is boneless and torpid.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

March 8, 1951

By OTIS L. GUERNSEY Jr.

Some Leaves Are Golden

A DISTINGUISHED cast creates a lot of good theater within a scattered script by Lillian Hellman at the Coronet. Using the close and jittery atmosphere of summer's end in a tarnished boarding house on the Gulf Coast, "The Autumn Garden" finds a large group of characters, mostly middle-aged, facing themselves bitterly or casually in many dramas tangled into one by the accident of hotel grouping. Miss Hellman is describing the end of each individual dream, and for each of her personalities she finds a suitable compromise with reality in this self-searching. That they all resemble each other below the surface makes for repetition, but it pulls them all together into a common plan. Fortunately there are five stars and three featured players providing individuality and color beyond the writing, in a grand display of interpretive art.

* * *

As a weak and self-deluding artist returning to the scene of his youth in search of some sort of comfort, Fredric March is the catalyst of the play. With his bravado, and his back-slapping attempts to pretend old friendships with people half-forgotten, he touches off a situation already charged with emotional and psychological conflicts under the compression of summer time in a small town. Florence Eldridge, Ethel Griffies, Kent Smith, Joan Lorring, Jane Wyatt, Carol Goodner, Colin Keith-Johnston and James Lipton make up the list of actors who, along with March, find themselves looking inward in extraordinary situations. From first to last they serve the play admirably, though in the very fact of their numbers the power of "The Autumn Garden" must be dissipated over all too wide an area.

* * *

Though the incidents of the play resemble each other in mood and even outcome, they are near-separate parts describable as a whole by the list of persons involved. March does a fine job with a role one does not often see him play: a loose and flaccid rascal whose attempts to help other people are more meddlesome than jovial. Miss Eldridge is perfection itself in the role of the childish, talkative wife of a general who wants to leave her and fly to the far places of his romantic imagining. The scene between her and Keith-Johnson as her husband, in which she reveals that she is really more frightened than frivolous, is a spine-tingling vignette of despair.

* * *

There are quite a few such high moments in "The Autumn Garden," and certainly Harold Clurman's direction is an important and commendable factor in bringing them about. So are the performances of Miss Griffies as a tough and flippant old grandmother, or Jane Wyatt as the artist's cool Bostonian wife who feels put-upon but discovers that she is getting what she deserves. This is a play of moments, and the whole is neither superior to nor much of an entity beyond its several episodes.

* * *

Joan Lorring is a standout even in this company as a young French girl living and working in the household, a soft and appealing rabbit of a lass who, strangely, does not jump at the first sharp sound and exhibits a strain of Gallic pragmatism. Kent Smith is excellent in the role of a sarcastic observer, a hollow man who has emptied his spirit with a delusion of unrequited passion. Carol Goodner is the keeper of this establishment, whose fond souvenir of an old love is gradually destroyed, and James Lipton and Margaret Barker are a son and mother hurting each other in a traditionally peculiar relationship. Howard Bay's set of a salon in a once elegant Southern home has a faint musty odor like the characters of the play and is eminently fitting for it. In "The Autumn Garden" Miss Hellman has taken another look at the South (though these people could come from anywhere), this time without an edge in her words. Her work is rounded, diffuse and sometimes almost shallow, but it provides a suitable gallery for a company of fine actors under the production seal of Kermit Bloomgarten at the Coronet.

New York Post

HOME NEWS

March 8, 1951

By Richard Watts Jr.

Lillian Hellman's Latest Drama

In a somber Chekhovian mood, Lillian Hellman has written a brooding philosophical play called "The Autumn Garden," which had its first performance at the Coronet Theater last night. It is a thoughtful and interesting drama, this latest work of one of the most distinguished of contemporary playwrights, and it is acted and produced with skill, care and steady intelligence. It is impossible not to have great respect for its maturity and integrity. Despite its adult virtues, however, it lacks the biting and overwhelming theatrical power that we have come to expect of Miss Hellman.

Gone is the tremendous dramatic vigor that has made Lillian Hellman's plays among the most emotionally and intellectually dynamic in the history of the American theater, and in its place is a quiet introspection that is almost bleak in its cold disregard of melodramatic excitement. To a certain extent this brooding contemplation marks an advance in the author's writing, substituting a new quality of mature deliberation for the sometimes febrile intensity of her earlier plays. But I suspect that the cost she pays for that maturity is a little excessive. Her new play needs some of the old-time bite.

Illusion

In "The Autumn Garden," Miss Hellman is contemplating the meaning of middle age to an assorted group of people gathered together in a summer home along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico. All of them are in one way or another frustrated and unhappy. Most of them are under the illusion that some day the things from which they suffer will be removed and they will be once more at peace. But when they come to see themselves, they realize that man is the sum of his past life, that they are incapable of any real revolt against their past, and that what they have made of themselves in earlier years is what they are when age approaches.

There is really no central character in the play. There is no great villain, and certainly there is no great hero. Nor are they tragic figures. All of them are troubled average people, human, commonplace and not intensely

interesting, but they are studied with great understanding and a touch of intelligently unsentimental compassion. Indeed, nothing much happens to them, which may be dramatically unfortunate, but, at the end, they have stripped themselves of at least a considerable part of their illusions, and the picture they find is not a pleasant one. "The Autumn Garden" is assuredly not a comforting play.

The Characters

At the end of the evening, not only do they know a lot about themselves, but you know a lot about them—the smugly philandering husband, the wife who enjoys her superiority to him, the general and the silly wife he hates, the interfering mother and her weakling son, the lovelorn spinster and the bachelor with the romantic illusion that he loves her. Much better off are an understanding grandmother and the young European relative with a saving strain of hardness about her. You will hardly find more believable people in the current drama. But they never become of tremendous dramatic interest.

Under Harold Clurman's skillful direction, every performance is excellent. Fredric March and Florence Eldridge have never been better than they are as the fatuous husband and the general's silly wife. Kent Smith as the bachelor, Jane Wyatt as the superior wife, Ethel Griffies as the grandmother, Carol Goodner as the spinster, Colin Keith-Johnston as the general, and Joan Lorring as the European girl couldn't very well be improved upon. There is a splendidly atmospheric set by Howard Bay. "The Autumn Garden" is a play in which the intelligence never falters, but I wish there were more of Miss Hellman's superb dramatic fire.

Daily Mirror

March 8, 1951

'Autumn Garden' Harps On Depressing Theme

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Lillian Hellman has a gift with words on a typewriter. She has few peers at portraying human meanness, loneliness and frustration. But in "The Autumn Garden," which Kermit Bloomgarden brought to the Coronet Theatre last evening, it seems to us that she has pulled the strings a little too obviously and futilely. Her people at times appear to be puppets.

The new arrival has to do with a fading Southern belle who takes in a few genteel boarders every Summer at her ancestral home on the Gulf of Mexico. Since Miss Hellman has chosen the South for her pet whipping boy, they are a sorry lot. There is a niece serving as a housemaid and yearning to return to the Europe where she was born.

There are a matriarch, her daughter-in-law and her effete grandson. There are a general with an aging and kittenish wife, and a disillusioned banker. As if that weren't enough, up pops a drunken dilettante and busybody accompanied by his spouse, who sees through him. He is bent on recapturing a past that never was, except in his mind, and he only succeeds in causing a mild scandal and bringing more misery to the miserable.

We think Miss Hellman might do well to pay a visit to the new South, which boasts a good many happy, prosperous and moral people. And we doubt that they are as prudish and stupid as she etches some to achieve a third act for her play. There is much admirable writing in "The Autumn Garden," but it never focuses to an effective point.

She states that people are the sum of their small acts, that those who have power and cannot use it should relinquish it. But she never proves these theses dramatically through her characters to our satisfaction.

As usual, Kermit Bloomgarden has come through with an excellent production. The top-flight cast includes Fredric March, Florence Eldridge, Ethel Griffies, Kent Smith, Jame Wyatt, Carol Goodner, Colin Keith-Johnston and Joan Lorring. There are capable direction by Harold Clurman, atmospheric settings and costumes by Howard Bay and Anna Hill Johnstone.

Miss Griffies, as per custom, plays with authority and bite. Young Miss Lorring makes the most of her opportunities. March wrestles valiantly with the dissolute, annoying Mr. Fixit.

"The Autumn Garden," in our opinion, sprouts some dull and depressing foliage. Its mazes are diffuse and not too rewarding.

DAILY NEWS

March 8, 1951

Hellman's 'Autumn Garden' Meaty Comedy Played by Flawless Cast

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Lillian Hellman's new play, "The Autumn Garden," is an excellent piece by a resourceful dramatist, and last evening at the Coronet Theatre it was performed for all it is worth by a flawless and extraordinarily interesting cast.

The play is worth quite a lot. Miss Hellman has put aside the heroic villainies and grim melodramatics of most of her previous work to examine the lives of all the people in a genteel house for Summer vacationers somewhere near New Orleans. Her examination is kindly, humorous and profound, and "The Autumn Garden" is an intelligent comedy which makes the point that most people are afraid to take a good look at themselves, and the few who are not afraid to take the look seldom find anything encouraging.

The company is a remarkable one and it has been remarkably well drilled by Harold Clurman, the director. Perhaps the most interesting of the performances is by Joan Lorring, a young blonde whose only other local stage appearance was in the role of the sexually practical girl in "Come Back, Little Sheba." It isn't that Miss Lorring's role is such a big one—although what happens to her is the key to the play; her success lies in making herself count among such experienced and gifted players as Ethel Griffies, Florence Eldridge, Fredric March, Colin Keith-Johnston, Kent Smith, Carol Goodner and Jane Wyatt.

A New Aubrey Piper.

Miss Hellman has barely had time and room enough to get all of her story into the three acts of her play, for she has packed it full of incident and character. In the main, it is a story of what happens in the house—once a family mansion—which the proudly impoverished Miss Goodner runs as a boarding place for a selected clientele.

The person who makes things happen is Mr. March, a dilettante artist married to a wealthy woman. Mr. March is the most annoying and most cheerful fixer-up of everybody's life since George Kelly wrote about Aubrey Piper in "The Show-Off." He has an instinct for drawing out the trouble in people. It is an elegantly funny performance.

All The People Are People.

Miss Eldridge is a middle-aged Southern nitwit who has talked her husband right out of her life, but can't stop talking. Mr. Keith-Johnston is a taciturn and gently embittered general of World War II. Mr. Smith is a lonely banker who finds that a bottle is the pleasantest companion. Miss Lorring is a foreign-born girl who is courageously trying to make herself fit the American life even though she'd rather be back home. Margaret Barker is a possessive mother and James Lipton is her possessed young son.

Of the lot, only Miss Lorring and Miss Griffies have pride and backbone and the ability to see clearly. Miss Griffies, as a testy and truth-speaking grandmother, is giving another of her uncannily commanding performances — and Miss Hellman has rewarded her with some fine, funny lines. Miss Wyatt's role is the most difficult, for she must be—and is—convincing as the wife who can't help loving the thoroughly exasperating Mr. March.

Howard Bay's setting is an utter gem of frowsy luxuriousness. "The Autumn Garden" is a very good piece of theatre.

"Mary Rose"

New York World-Telegram
and
The [illegible] Sun

March 5, 1951

'Mary Rose' Proves Thought-Provoking

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Type—Fantasy.
Topic—Ghosts.
I find it—Absorbing.

The latest addition to the ANTA Subscription Series is James M. Barrie's "Mary Rose." It is a tender and exteremely delicate play which holds the attention a good deal more steadfastly than you might expect from a casual description of it.

Barrie was often more interested in content and mood than in the shapeliness of his plays. In this case, constructing exactly as he chose, he spun out ideas that linger long after the curtain.

Mystery Island.

The story takes place in several different periods of time. At the beginning a young Australian is looking over a now empty house which he dimly remembers as a child. In the end he is reassuring the ghost of his own mother, whose search for him has prevented her contentment in the hereafter.

In between is told the love story of the mysterious Mary Rose. As a youngster she once visited a tiny island in the Hebrides, where she disappeared with no trace for a month. She then returned entirely unconscious of having been away.

When she is a young mother she makes her husband take her back to the island. Again she disappears. This time she comes back only after 25 years.

Now she is dazed by the shock of finding all her family older, when she has not changed. She always had a charming childish streak in her, and even now she wants to play games. But her son has run away to sea and it is clear that she will not rest until she finds him.

Impermanent Death.

The play is open to certain argument about its meaning and interpretation. The disappearances symbolize death, but just how and why are they impermanent?

I think Barrie was saying that there is no such thing as a ghost. He feels that the dead necessarily pass into vaguer and vaguer memory and should be allowed to rest.

Helen Hayes has produced the play for ANTA and assembled a first class cast for it. Bethel Leslie plays the title role with a nice understanding of a romping youngster shouldering emotions too complex for her. It is a juvenile quality rather than an ethereal one which marks her performance, and I think this keeps the play from becoming too light to last.

Theater-Wise Stars.

Starred in the production are Patricia Collinge as the girl's mother and Leo G. Carroll as her father. Both offer most theater-wise performances, and Miss Collinge in particular lends a touching emotional quality to their scenes.

Ray Boyle is excellent as the young husband, eager and stalwart, and maturing logically. Oliver Thorndike plays with graceful understanding a gem of a part, in the Scottish guide. And Daniel Reed has his inimitable moments as a friend of the old folks.

The production is unaffected and answers its purpose. I would prefer less of the caterwauling sound effects, and a good deal more clarity of speech. But these troubles along with what looked like some demented lighting, are minor and can quickly be corrected.

"MARY ROSE"

Play by James M. Barrie; staged by John Stix; settings by Jack Landau; costumes by Aline Bernstein; presented by Helen Hayes for the American National Theatre and Academy at the ANTA Playhouse, March 4, 1951. The cast:

Mrs. Otery.....Peg Mayo
Harry.....James Daly
Mr. Morland....Leo G. Carroll
Mrs. Morland..Patricia Collinge
Rev. George Amy..Daniel Reed
Mary Rose.....Bethel Leslie
Simon Blake.....Ray Boyle
Cameron.....Oliver Thorndike

Synopsis: Act I. A house in Sussex. Act II. The Island. Act III. The house in Sussex.

DAILY NEWS

March 5, 1951

J. M. Barrie's Fantasy, 'Mary Rose,' Given Enchanting Revival by ANTA

By JOHN CHAPMAN

The most endearing and most enchanting production of the theatrical season is Helen Hayes' revival of J. M. Barrie's "Mary Rose," which was presented on behalf of the American National Theatre and Academy at the ANTA Playhouse last evening. It is ANTA's best effort to date. It will afford those who care to see it during a two-week run an utterly sentimental evening in which there are some really fine performances.

"Mary Rose" did quite well when it was produced during the Christmas holidays of 1920 with Ruth Chatterton in the title role. No practical, commercial producer would attempt it today, for its sweet innocence would baffle the Squares of the Sardi Set and drive them, in a defensive reaction, to make jokes about it. Who would use such a modern phrase as "simply sensational" to describe a play which is no play at all, being no more than a little bit of a ghost story? But, thanks to Miss Hayes and ANTA, of which she is president, a few of us can see it and, for an hour or two, regain some of our lost illusions.

Strange Little Ghost.

"Mary Rose" is about a happy girl who is captured by an island. The first time this odd seizure occurs she is quite small. She vanishes 20 days from a picnic islet in the Scottish Hebrides, and when she returns to her parents she does not realize she has been away at all. The next time she goes, she is grown, she is married and is a mother—and this time she is gone for a quarter of a century. Her return is strange indeed — but stranger to her than it is to the loving ones who have mourned her all this time. Finally she becomes a tired and puzzled little ghost, still looking for something which existed so long ago that she can't quite remember what it is.

Certainly there can be no play in such nonsense as this—not nearly the strength that lies in Barrie's "Peter Pan." But it has something. Perhaps I am the ghost, and perhaps I went last evening to the ANTA Playhouse looking for something I could not exactly remember. Perhaps what I found was nothing at all—except a sense of pleasure.

Leo Carroll Outstanding.

The acting is of a superior order. It isn't loud acting, or big acting. It is merely "right" acting. I have never seen Leo G. Carroll give a more enchanting performance as he plays Mary Rose's father. It is so quietly, so easily done, and to watch Mr. Carroll laugh an Englishman's laugh at an Englishman's joke in the Englishman's "Punch" is a delightful privilege. Another privilege is to see Patricia Collinge as Mary Rose's mother—so loving, so full of womanly humor and womanly heartbreak. And some very fine comedy—the human and pathetic kind of comedy—occurs whenever Daniel Reed joins this pair in the role of a family friend.

Bethel Leslie is admirable in the title role, being fresh, sweet and tremulous. One of the best of the performances is contributed by another stage youngster, Oliver Thorndike, as a Scottish individualist. Ray Boyle also is well chosen as Mary Rose's young husband, and there are nice bits of work by James Daly and Peg Mayo. John Stix has directed the play sensitively and respectfully. There is a good setting by Jack Landau, but last evening ANTA's electricians never quite knew how to light it. They should rehearse their light cues all day today.

The New York Times

March 5, 1951

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Although Barrie's "Mary Rose" seemed rather mawkish when it was new in 1920, it seems decently affecting today. Since the intellectual climate today is even less congenial than it was thirty-one years ago, the new performance must be the saving factor. It was revived last evening at the Anta Playhouse in a tender performance that neither evades the sentiment nor wallows in it. Under the imaginative direction of John Stix it has conjured up a touching fantasy with daintiness and conviction.

Apparently Barrie was saying that the dead are happier if we relinquish them completely. Like thousands of other people at the time he was grieving over a youth lost in the war. That was his private agony. What he says in "Mary Rose" does not alter anything since there is nothing to be done about those who have gone.

* * *

But no doubt it sweetened his own lonely contemplation. For "Mary Rose" is the fable of a girl who is lost on an enchanted island where time stands still. Twice she comes back. On the first occasion, she has been away only twenty days, and time does not matter much. But many years elapse before she returns the second time. Her parents are aged. Her husband is old. Her son has gone out into the world. The reunion is painful to her and to everyone else. It is better not to return. It is better not to long for the return of those that are gone.

Compounded of sentiment, romance and fantasy, "Mary Rose" is a difficult play to catch in terms of the theatre. But it could hardly be done with more dexterity than at the Anta Playhouse. This is the play that Helen Hayes has produced as her contribution to the Anta series. It is a credit to her taste and to the skill of the director and the actors.

As the elderly people, Patricia Collinge, Leo G. Carroll and Daniel Reed play with a warmth, dryness and reticence that make their scenes delightful. Barrie knew how to write those little sketches of dialogue humorously, and the actors have matched him with every line.

All the young parts are played triumphantly. Bethel Leslie plays the elusive part of Mary Rose with great delicacy and sincerity. It is a clean, light, fresh and lovely performance made out of spindrift. Ray Boyle could not be better as her suitor and husband—manly and frank and perceptive. There is a capital performance by Oliver Thorndike as one of the crotchety Scots folk Barrie liked to write about. And James Daly gives a first-rate performance in the part of the braggart son who tries honestly to help a ghost go back to her native land. Peg Mayo is excellent in the shorter part of the apprehensive caretaker.

As a matter of fact, everyone is in good form on the present occasion—Jack Landau, who has done the settings without succumbing to a temptation to overdo them; Aline Bernstein, who has found simple costumes that are just outside literal reality; Nathan Kroll, who has composed some brief musical incantations, and Abe Feder, whose lighting will be full of witchery when the boys learn their cues.

As was the case originally, "Mary Rose" does not satisfy the mind. One may be forgiven for being skeptical about the value of what Barrie was saying. It was very personal then; and after all these years it still seems personal. On those terms, it is fragile and affecting, innocent, pure-hearted and merciful.

New York Herald Tribune

March 5, 1951

By OTIS L. GUERNSEY Jr.

Barrie Walks

THE latest production in the ANTA series is a leisurely ghost story, a revival of J. M. Barrie's "Mary Rose." Produced by Helen Hayes for the ANTA schedule, this show gathers Leo J. Carroll, Bethel Leslie, Patricia Collinge and others for a terror-over-the-teacups kind of tale set in a gloomy British country house and on an enchanted Hebrides isle. It is slow going sometimes exasperating, as the actors do all they can with character sketches to fill the spaces between progressions. The play has several chilly scenes and some suspense, but on the whole it is somewhat more vaporous in outline than is comfortable, even for a visitation from the other world.

* * *

Barrie's whimsey concerns a young girl of peaceful family bewitched by an island which causes people to disappear and occasionally allows them to return with no memory of their experience and no age added on since the disappearance. The girl, played by Miss Leslie with a haunted, childish gayety, does not know that in her youth she once vanished in this place, and, returning there after marriage, she is trapped once more in limbo. This is a time-distorted script in which the final scene is played between a ghostly mother and a living son of about equal age. It is underlaid, like most of Barrie's fancies, with an ironic reality. In the case of "Mary Rose" he is making the point that it is less distressing to endure loss than to have the object of bereavement turn up in a disappointing form.

* * *

There is a touch of "The Monkey's Paw" in this idea, but not so vividly expressed. In fact, two of the best scenes have nothing at all to do with the story. They are an argument over old sketches between Leo G. Carroll as the girl's father and Daniel Reed as his clergyman friend, and the verbal famblings of Paul Anderson as a Scottish hired man telling a pair of picknickers what he thinks of them and what he intends to do with his life. For the rest, some of it is spooky and some of it emotional, but never in a consistent framework. The theme is as elusive as the voices heard by its heroine, and the members of this production do not get hold of it long enough to do anything positive with it.

* * *

Carroll is a strong bulwark as the kindly parent, giving the illusion of deep feeling under a reticent exterior. Miss Leslie plays the leading role airily in a spritely performance which might have had a few loose threads trimmed off by a sharper direction. Miss Collinge is the girl's helpless, worried mother, Ray Boyle is the brash young Navy officer who weds the charmed lass, James Daly is their son grown up years later and Peg Mayo is a housekeeper in the "present" scenes which frame the flashback majority of the piece. In general, Miss Hayes' revival production of "Mary Rose" is interesting, but lacking in sustained theatrical excitement. It is scheduled for an engagement of two weeks at the ANTA Playhouse.

Journal American

March 5, 1951

Moving, Rewarding —But Last Act Sags

By JOHN McCLAIN

The ANTA series marched onward last night with a production of J. M. Barrie's "Mary Rose," presented by Helen Hayes and including in its cast Leo G. Carroll, Patricia Collinge and in the title part an extremely engaging young actress named Bethel Leslie.

I found it rewarding and frequently moving entertainment and if I can't go all the way in approbation it is because the play itself is irritably oblique and the third act, particularly, sags and falls on its face.

Old Mons. Barrie, to the contrary, is still a very fast man with dialogue. There are many scenes written with such immaculate skill that one deplores the fact that they do not, as an entity, add up to an entirely intelligible evening.

This is even more regrettable when regarded in light of the excellent performances of all concerned. Miss Leslie has your heart beating in jig-time through her sheer youth and beauty and sincerity, and a short time later Mr. Carroll and Miss Collinge render you inarticulate and blubbering through a charming consideration of two people who have gracefully grown old together.

You expect so much from all this, and I don't think that last act repays you as it should.

The idea, as I caught it, is that there is a very limited future for ghosts. Mr. Barrie apparently wrote it at a time after World War I when there was a great upsurge of spiritualism and this is his means of saying, "So you want to come back after death? Well, you ain't going to like it."

* * *

Really Gone

Miss Leslie goes to a strange island off the Scottish coast a few years after she has been happily married to a young English naval officer and borne him a child. He is putting out the fire over which their picnic luncheon has been cooked when she wanders off and disappears. I mean this girl is really gone.

Twenty-five years go by and she suddenly reappears, not a day older, at the home of her aged parents. If you know your J. M. Barrie you will not consider this alarming and the whole thing is done with such truly professional mastery that it seems almost plausible.

I loved Mr. Carroll's line: "Should she have come back?" or words somewhat similar, not meant to be unloving, only inquisitive.

But then there is this last scene in which she is a ghost, still young and vibrant, quartered in her childhood home, and now suddenly confronted by her son—a full-grown man.

This, I gather, is the mission she seeks to fulfill. At long last locating the lad. This will presumably release her from the spirit world and permit her to take her proper place among the dead.

I don't know what I expected of this final scene, but I felt let down by what I got. So much was promised and so little—I thought—came through.

Daily Mirror
March 5, 1951

Revived Fantasy Proves Sir James Could Write

By ROBERT COLEMAN

There are no two ways about it. The late Sir James M. Barrie knew how to portray people and how to write. This was what popped into our mind as we saw Helen Hayes' revival of "Mary Rose" at the ANTA Playhouse Saturday evening. We caught the fantasy back in 1920 when it was originally done on Broadway, and didn't think too much of it then.

As we recall it, the notices were mixed. Some critics and many playgoers admitted to being baffled. They couldn't quite fathom what Barrie was trying to say. We still aren't sure of just what point he was trying to make. But of one thing we are convinced: he did create a suspenseful, absorbing atmosphere. And, by modern standards, the script equals or even surpasses the best of its genre.

"Mary Rose" has to do with a young English girl taken to Scotland by her parents. While her father fishes, she plays on an island fraught with legend and shunned by the native Scots. Almost before her father's eyes, she vanishes, only to return about a month later with no memory of where she has been.

After marrying a young naval officer, she persuades her husband to take her back to the mystic isle for a picnic. Again she vanishes, this time for 25 years. Upon her reappearance, she hasn't aged a bit and is shocked to discover that those she loves have grown older. Then comes World War I.

An Australian soldier visits the Morland home, now thought to be haunted by a ghost. And it is—by the ghost of Mary Rose Blake, nee Morland. The soldier is the son of Mary Rose, who had run away to seek adventure during her mysterious and prolonged absence. In a tense and touching scene, the lad takes his wraithlike mother on his knee, fulfilling a desire that she had expressed when he was but an infant on her knee. This breaks the spell, and Mary Rose goes back to the peace of a world beyond.

"Mary Rose" is such an enjoyable play, it casts such a delightful spell that it is perhaps ungracious to seek a message in it. But if one has to, it seems to us that Barrie is offering an opposite proposition to that in "Peter Pan." It is a wonderful thing to have a youthful viewpoint, to escape into Never-Never Land, but there comes a time in maturity to face realities and not flee from them.

Miss Hayes has given "Mary Rose" a fine and affectionate production. The direction by John Stix is excellent. So are the settings by Jack Landau, the costumes by Aline Bernstein and the lighting by Feder. So is the cast.

Leo G. Carroll and Patricia Collinge are quite wonderful as the elder Morlands. Bethel Leslie, a Hayes protegee, is tender and touching in the title role. Ray Boyle is admirable as Mary Rose's sympathetic husband. Paul Anderson, taking over on short notice the part of Cameron from an ailing Oliver Thorndike, gives a performance of skill and heart. He is a young actor to watch.

There is a warming contribution by the ever-reliable Daniel Reed as a minister with a penchant for art.

In retrospect: Maybe we were a little obtuse back in 1920. Maybe we were surfeited by theatrical riches. Anyway, "Mary Rose" looms today as a glowing masterpieces of its kind. Sir James could write.

New York Post
HOME NEWS
March 5, 1951

By Richard Watts Jr.

The Legend of Ageless Mary Rose

It has been thirty years, heaven help us all, since J. M. Barrie's "Mary Rose" was first presented in New York, with Ruth Chatterton in the title role, and I think that the eerie and sentimental little fantasy has aged rather well. It never was, I suspect, exactly a masterpiece, and the passing of more than a quarter of a century hasn't transformed it into one, but, if you will accept the author's mannerisms, as most people seem willing to do, it still has a frequently rather touching sentimental appeal. And it is currently well acted.

The present production, which Helen Hayes and the American National Theater and Academy offered last night at the ANTA Playhouse, was chiefly intended to provide an opportunity for the interesting talents of Bethel Leslie, one of the most skillful of the younger American actresses, and in this it is highly successful. Miss Leslie is a sensitive, intelligent and charming player, and she proves herself entirely worthy of the confidence Miss Hayes placed in her. Then, too, it is always good to see Leo G. Carroll, even in a subordinate role, and there are excellent performances by Patricia Collinge, Daniel Reed, Ray Boyle and Oliver Thorndike.

Gaelic Isle

"Mary Rose," as you may either remember or have heard, tells of the legend of an islet in the Hebrides known by a Gaelic name which means the Island That Likes to Be Visited. It is the story of a girl wife who disappeared there one afternoon and turned up 25 years later, just as young as she was on the day of her disappearance, while her husband and parents have aged in the customary, non-Barrie-esque fashion. It is, finally, the tale of how, after death, her restless ghost wandered her family's home in quest of the son she had left behind.

If you will forgive the autobiography for a moment, I once engaged in quite an eloquent controversy with the eminent Corey Ford over the merits of "Mary Rose." As undergraduate critic of the Columbia Spectator, I reviewed the play when it was first produced here, and sneered at it loftily. Mr. Ford, who was one of its enthusiasts, took issue with me vigorously, and we went after each other with fine youthful frenzy. I'd like to take this opportunity to tell my valiant antagonist that I still think he overrated "Mary Rose" but that I enjoyed it more last night than I did originally.

Barrie and Youth

It continues to be my impression that Barrie was a considerably overrated playwright. His preoccupation with the theme of children who refuse to grow up is, I can't help feeling, an embarrassing sign of his own relentless passion for immaturity. The entire third act of "Mary Rose" strikes me as uncomfortable in its sentimental excursions, and I am certainly not made happy when the heroine's son takes the ghost of his mother on his knee and calls her "poor ghostie." The late Sir James could be a very trying playwright.

Nevertheless, a great deal of "Mary Rose" is interesting and charming. It begins in the most pleasantly eerie fashion, and the mystic legend of the Island That Likes to Be Visited is presented with curiously persuasive skill. Barrie was also at his best in the creation of the minor character of a prim young Scottish divinity student, well played by Mr. Thorndike. There is some likeable humor in "Mary Rose" and some effective story-telling. And it is fine to see Miss Leslie in a proper role. I can at least hail the play with modified rapture.

"Springtime Folly"

Daily Mirror

February 27, 1951

'Springtime Folly' Turns Out to Be Just That

By ROBERT COLEMAN

"Springtime Folly" is the title of a farce that arrived at the John Golden Theatre last evening. It is also the name of a maternity dress that figures prominently in the proceedings, and a description of what United Producers committed when they presented the dramaturgic misdemeanor.

Joseph Schulman, William H. and Martin R. Lieberson are the authors. They have given us a rehash of the old cheating-cheaters plot, with a garment center background. Two dress manufacturers form a firm specializing in blessed-event garments. But one of them, the designer, draws up a special model, without the necessary pleats, for a gold-digging girl friend.

A contractor gets the wrong pattern and makes a few thousand of the non-expendable dresses. As if that weren't enough, the silk has been obtained under dubious circumstances from a wholesaler in the hospital with a nervous breakdown. If you want to know how the partners squared their rap, you'll have to see "Springtime Folly" for yourself. And you're a sucker for punishment if you do.

Leon Michel has directed the script with all the finesse of a boiler-maker. Louis Kennel has devised a setting replete with posters from which we shall not quote in this family newspaper.

It gave us the willies to see such excellent troupers as Jack Whiting, Irene Dailey and Mabel Taliaferro caught in such tasteless shenanigans. Sam Jackson, Betty Walker, Gilbert Mack, Michelle Condre, Ray Newcomer, Ann Sorg, Philip Abbott, June St. Clair, Jon Silo, Maurice Fitzgerald and Charles Mayer are other valiant players trapped in the farcical fiasco.

A worse play may come along before the end of the season, but we doubt it. As of the present, "Springtime Folly" is our candidate for the 1950-51 booby prize. A goodly number of first-nighters failed to answer the bell for Act III last night. After all, the average playgoer can only stand so much. But a hapless drama critic has to go the route.

"SPRINGTIME FOLLY"

Comedy by Joseph Schulman and William H. Lieberson, with an assist by Martin R. Lieberson; staged by Leon Michel; settings by Louis Kennel; presented by United Producers at the John Golden Theatre, February 26, 1951. The cast:

Alec.....Sam Jackson
Patsy.....Betty Walker
Louis De Vito.....Gilbert Mack
Miss Woods....Michelle Condre
Mr. Small.....Ray Newcomer
Benjamin Talbot...Jack Whiting
Martha Talbot.....Ann Sorg
Phil Gordon.....Philip Abbott
Winifred LaRue...June St. Clair
George Baroff.....Jon Silo
Mrs. Anders..Mabel Taliaferro
Miss Pomeroy.....Irene Dailey
Mr. Walters..Maurice Fitzgerald
Mr. Kurlin.....Charles Mayer

Journal-American

February 27, 1951

An Embarrassingly Inadequate Comedy

By JOHN McCLAIN

Last night I viewed something called "Springtime Folly," which opened at the John Golden Theatre and I must say in all honesty that it is the first time I have been required to hand down a decision on an embarrassingly inadiquate production.

I don't know why it was written in the first place; I don't know how the writers got anybody interested to the point of making an investment; and I can't understand why any actors, having read the script, could have been persuaded to go on with the venture.

Usually in efforts of this kind there is at least some basis for argument. The general theme may not be up my alley, but that doesn't mean it may not appeal to a lot of perfectly estimable backers and actors. There is always some good writing or a fine scene somewhere along the way which can explain why people normally had faith in it.

"Springtime Folly" has none of these plus factors.

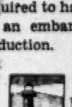
The premise here is the travail of two partners in a business devoted to maternity gowns, an undertaking in which very few people have any knowledge or interest.

It never seemed very important whether they made a success of their objective, although numberless people rush in and out of doors, faint and have heart attacks to keep this fragile firm in operation.

I am an old fan of Jack Whiting, who has performed amiably and well in many a musical, and I was somewhat alarmed to see him up there thrashing around as one of the proprietors in this implausible dress firm.

The same goes for Mabel Taliaferro and Gilbert Mack, both seasoned performers, who certainly did their level best but apparently knew that they were involved in a clinker. They read the lines like little soldiers, all of them, but you could almost see them say, "Oh, no!"

I think the least said about "Springtime Folly" is the best. And this is about the least I can say.



New York World-Telegram and The Sun

February 27, 1951

Farce Is Well Worn In 'Springtime Folly'

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

There is nothing so functional in a farce as a swinging door. "Springtime Folly" proudly centers most of its action around one, with generally lamentable results.

The goings on take place in the office of a dress manufacturer, and most of the jokes must be special to the trade. This particular plot concerns a shoestring firm which plunges its all on a new model of maternity gown. The material is bought on credit, and the dresses are cut wrong so they are all returned.

Given this premise, and a batty character who wants to start a "dress of the month club" which terrifies regular buyers, and it is no trick to guess what happens.

Most of the evening is spent with characters being swatted in various places and positions by the swinging doors.

Audience Sympathetic.

There was an air about the audience last night that suggested many of its members had some remote connection with the production. They greeted all the comedy lines with grim determination. Since it was impossible to laugh, they substituted stolid bursts of applause.

Similar resolve characterized the acting. This is the sort of play of which it is unfortunately true that one wonders how on earth the cast can remember the lines. Yet they did, and performed with continual zest, if a marked lack of finesse.

Most notable among them is Jack Whiting, hero of so many musicals, who appears as one of the manufacturers. Although he professes here to have a marriageable daughter, he looks as juvenile as ever.

Other Victims.

Whiting is all over the place at once and stamps the play with a professional attitude it sorely lacks on its own.

Mabel Taliaferro has done just about everything the theater knows how to do. Here she is buffeted by fate and the playwrights as the president of the dress club. She manages to look extremely pretty and accepts her assignment as a human volley ball in good faith.

There are a number of other perfectly pleasant people involved in this dreary affair, among them Gilbert Mack and Betty Walker.